

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mitchell Polman**

The USA-World Trust is an Idea Whose Time Has Come ^[1]

The Brookings Institution's report on its proposed USA-World Trust has unleashed a predictable torrent of criticism from the public diplomacy community. To be sure, not all of the commentary has been negative, but much of it has been. The critics are rehashing many of the same tired arguments that have been used to kill any ideas to deal with today's public diplomacy realities.

Predictably much of the discussion has centered on how the trust is or is not like the old US Information Agency (USIA). Many seem to be asking why if we are going to create the Trust then why do we not just recreate USIA? The answer for that is quite simple: The USIA was created in 1953 and America has changed a great deal since then. In 1953 most Americans who had traveled overseas or had an interest in foreign cultures were either recent immigrants, the children of recent immigrants, or had missionary backgrounds. That is no longer the case.

In my travels across America I have met countless Americans who have served in the Peace Corps, studied abroad, worked overseas, served in the military overseas, travel abroad for pleasure annually, married a foreigner, or have hosted exchange students. There are now hundred of thousands of Americans who hold degrees in international affairs or related fields such as international public health or international business. The days when America was an insular and isolated nation are long gone. Many inside the Beltway still can't seem to grasp this. One time I heard a Washington based journalist tell a large group of visiting foreign journalists that nobody in America knows the difference between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. Two weeks later I was in a Minot, North Dakota coffeeshop with two of those journalists and we overheard two middle-aged men nearby discuss the differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam. The local state university in Minot had a relationship with Johns Hopkins SAIS that enabled their students to participate in SAIS' programs in China. I have many other similar anecdotes.

The fact is that there are many Americans who are working at the grassroots level to build ties with other nations and they don't need professional diplomats to assist them. The Internet is making it that much easier for Americans to independently conduct their own versions of public diplomacy. What Americans do need is an institution that can provide them with the financial support that is necessary to empower them to build on those ties. I myself - and many other Americans I know - have been involved with many fine projects that failed to get off the ground for lack of a very modest amount of funding. Our current public diplomacy structure still operates under the assumption that only foreign policy professionals can create public diplomacy programs. In short, we need to put the "public" into public diplomacy. That is not the case now and it would still not be the case if we re-created the old USIA. Given that Americans have a tendency to view government as the last solution to any problem, it is peculiar to me that so many Americans feel that public diplomacy is something that only the

government can take the lead on.

I want to be clear that I am not saying that there is no need for the State Department or another government institution to conduct public diplomacy. Obviously only the State Department can explain U.S. foreign policy. There are also some programs such as the Fulbright Scholars and the International Visitors Leadership Program that are so large that State needs to be the ultimate director of them. Indeed, much of our public diplomacy is already contracted out to organizations such as the Institute of International Education, American Councils for International Education, Meridian International Center, and other non-profit organizations that receive a substantial amount of State Department funding. However, there are many things that State is not doing either for lack of resources, lack of personnel, or simply because they are so small in scale that they are not worth the time of State Department officials. That is where the Trust comes in. The Trust would be an accessible public institution for Americans and foreigners in a way that the State Department is not. It would be staffed by people who would not be rotated out to other assignments after two years and they would thus be able to see projects through from start to finish. It would not operate under the direction of State and therefore it would not be encumbered by government contracting bureaucracy. The Trust would be open to outside proposals for public diplomacy programs in a way that the State Department is unable to be. The Trust would be an institution that could assist rank-and-file American citizens develop their own ideas for spreading American ideas and culture abroad. If the Trust were to work overseas it would have to develop its own security plans independent of the State Department's diplomatic security personnel.

I am firmly convinced that the proposed Trust would help unleash the creative spirits of Americans and foreigners alike to come up with innovative ways to build ties between the American people and the rest of the world. It is a fine example of thinking outside the box. Those who are concerned about the state of our public diplomacy should embrace the proposal and work to make it a reality. The Trust will not solve all of our public diplomacy problems, but it would be a large step in the right direction. We need to take a step back and look at where our public diplomacy efforts are coming up short. I myself have seen too many excellent ideas fall by the wayside for a lack of funding or a lack of interest. I know a Tajik TV journalist who came here wanting to shoot a documentary series about American life, but whose visa will soon expire before he was ever able to step outside of the Washington area. Other nations such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France have institutions similar to the proposed Trust. There is no reason why the United States cannot do the same.
